



Elder Health Alert

Alcohol and Medications: A Dilemma for Older People



WINTER, 1999

Today older people are becoming better educated about how to stay as healthy as possible.

Information is widely available on such important topics as proper nutrition, healthy exercise and access to medical care. However, one area that older people may overlook is their use of alcohol and medications.

Most older people take some medications, whether these medicines are over-the-counter or prescribed by a physician or nurse practitioner. Many older people also drink alcohol. As we age, these substances can affect us differently and may produce harmful interactions. All medication and alcohol use should be reviewed regularly. For example, many older people may find that the use of alcohol, often combined with tranquilizers or sleeping pills, may be causing them problems. This is a time to consider whether drinking and medication use is causing problems for you.

As you think about your own use of alcohol and medications, consider the following:

- **Have you ever been concerned about your use of medications or alcohol?**
- **Has anyone else been concerned about your use of alcohol or medications?**
- **Have you forgotten to check with your doctor or nurse recently about all the medications you take?**
- **Do you feel you need medication to help you fall asleep at night?**
- **Have you been taking tranquilizers or sleeping medications for more than a few weeks?**
- **Have you found that you rely on alcohol or medications to get you through rough times?**

- **Is your alcohol or medication making you feel groggy, dizzy or ill-tempered?**
- **Do you have difficulty remembering how to take your medications properly?**
- **Are you confused about what medications you are taking and what they are for?**
- **Have you experienced problems with mood swings or other feelings that might be related to the use of medications or alcohol?**
- **Have you been uneasy about the amount of alcohol or medications that you now take?**

If you answered YES to any of these questions, you might want to talk with your doctor or nurse practitioner about your use of medications and alcohol. Sometimes even a brief conversation can help you to consider changing the way or the amount of alcohol and medication you use. Remember, it is important not to change your prescription medication use before talking with your doctor. A pharmacist can also be a reliable source of information about the

medications you take and how they may affect you.

The above questions might also apply to a friend or family member. Since problems with alcohol and medications are fairly common among older people, you might know someone who is affected and in need of help.

HOW TO GET HELP:

Many resources are available to help older people assess their use of alcohol and medications, and also to help them take steps to change or eliminate alcohol and some medications that may be causing problems. The first step in getting help is to realize that there might be a problem. Many older people, perhaps because they have used alcohol for years, do not realize that alcohol problems can occur at any age. Medication misuse can also contribute to many other problems such as depression, confusion, dizziness and falls. Careful assessment of the use of medications and alcohol can result in positive changes for most older people.

TREATMENT WORKS:

Although many older people may be affected by medication and alcohol problems, the good news is that older people tend to respond very well to treatment. Meeting with a doctor, learning about medications and alcohol, group support, and counseling can all be very effective. Treatment is available and does work.

Remember: Older age does not mean ill health. If you feel tired, dizzy, groggy, depressed, or have mood swings, these and other complaints might be signs of problems with medication and/or alcohol use. If this is true for you, this is the time to take action. Eliminating problems with medications and alcohol can mean a much healthier older age.

FOR INFORMATION ON HOW TO FIND TREATMENT RESOURCES, CONTACT:

Alcoholics Anonymous: Boston area-617-426-9444; Worcester area-508-752-9000; Springfield area-413-532-2111

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Alcohol and Drug Hotline: 1-800-327-5050; TDD 617-457-2100

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Bureau of Substance Abuse Services: 617-624-5111

National Council on Alcoholism: 212-206-6770

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For additional copies of this Alert contact Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Elder Health Programs at 617-624-5405

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